PB88-196159

New-Construction Techniques and HVAC (Heating, Venting and Air Conditioning) Overpressurization for Radon Reduction in Schools

(U.S.) Environmental Protection Agency
Reserch Triangle Park, NC

Apr 88

U.S. Department of Commerce
National Technical Information Service

PB88-196159

EPA/600/D-88/073
April 1988

NEW-CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES AND HVAC OVERPRESSURIZATION FOR RADON REDUCTION IN SCHOOLS

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REPRODUCED BY
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Technical Information Service
SPRINGFIELD, VA. 22161

TECHNICAL REPORT DATA (Please read Instructions on the reverse before completing)		
1. REPORT NO. EPA/600/D-88/073	2.	3. RECIPIENT'S ACCESSION NO. PB88-196159/AS
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE New-Construction Techniques and HVAC Overpressurization for Radon Reduction in Schools		5. REPORT DATE April 1988 6. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION CODE
7. AUTHOR(S) K.A. Witter and A.B. Craig (EPA/AEERL), and D. Saum (Infiltec)*		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NO.
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS See Block 12		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT NO. 11. CONTRACT/GRANT NO. NA
12. SPONSORING AGENCY NAME AND ADDRESS EPA, Office of Research and Development, Air and Energy Engineering Research Laboratory, Research Triangle Park, NC 27711		13. TYPE OF REPORT AND PERIOD COVERED Published paper; 6/87-3/88 14. SPONSORING AGENCY CODE EPA/600/13

15. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES AEERL project officer is Kelly A. Witter, Mail Drop 54, 919/541-7717.
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16. ABSTRACT The paper reports recent results of EPA work related to new-construction techniques and HVAC overpressurization for radon reduction in schools. Construction of a Fairfax County, Virginia, school is being monitored since elevated indoor radon levels have been identified in many houses near the site. Soil gas radon concentrations measured before the slabs were poured also indicated a potential radon problem if soil gas enters the school; however, subslab radon measured so far is lower than anticipated. Radon-resistant features incorporated into construction of the school include: at least 100 mm of clean coarse aggregate under the slab, a plastic film barrier between the aggregate and the slab, sealing of all expansion joints, sealing or plugging of all utility penetrations where possible, painting of interior block walls, and a HVAC system designed to operate continuously in overpressurization to help reduce pressure-driven entry of radon-containing soil gas into the building. When the school is completed, indoor radon levels will be monitored to determine the effectiveness of these radon-resistant new-construction techniques in limiting radon entry.

17. KEY WORDS AND DOCUMENT ANALYSIS			
a. DESCRIPTORS		b. IDENTIFIERS/OPEN ENDED TERMS	c. COSATI Field/Group
Pollution	Soils	Pollution Control	13B 08G, 08M
Radon	Atmosphere Contamination Control	Stationary Sources	07B
Schools		Indoor Air	05I 06K
Ventilation		New Construction	13A
Sealers			11A
Gases			07D

18. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT	19. SECURITY CLASS (This Report)	21. NO. OF PAGES
Release to Public	Unclassified	18
	20. SECURITY CLASS (This page) Unclassified	22. PRICE A03 12.95

EPA Form 2220-1 (9-73)

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ABSTRACT

Construction of a school in Fairfax County, Virginia, is being carefully monitored since elevated indoor radon levels have been identified in many existing houses near the site. Soil gas radon concentrations measured prior to pouring of the slabs were also indicative of a potential radon problem should the soil gas enter the school; however, subslab radon measurements collected thus far are lower than anticipated.

Radon-resistant features have been incorporated into construction of the school and include the placing of at least 100 mm of clean coarse aggregate under the slab and a plastic film barrier between the aggregate and the slab, the sealing of all expansion joints, the sealing or plugging of all utility penetrations where possible, and the painting of interior block walls. In addition, the school's heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning (HVAC) system has been designed to operate continuously in overpressurization to help reduce pressure-driven entry of radon-containing soil gas into the building. Following completion, indoor radon levels in the school will be monitored to determine the effectiveness of these radon-resistant new-construction techniques and HVAC overpresssurization in limiting radon entry into the school.

INTRODUCTION

Elevated levels of indoor radon have been found in houses throughout the United States, and the growing concern of the lung cancer risks associated with radon is spreading to high occupancy public buildings such as schools. Since children spend a large portion of time in schools, elevated radon levels in schools represent a significant health concern. However, experience in installation of radon-resistant construction features in new schools and radon mitigation of existing schools is limited.

Construction recently began on an elementary school in Fairfax County, Virginia, and as plans developed, it became evident that many houses near the school site had indoor radon levels much above the 4 picocuries per liter (pCi/l) action level recommended by the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Consequently, the construction of the school is being carefully monitored, and several radon-resistant new-construction features are being installed in an effort to reduce the potential for elevated levels of radon in the school.

Construction details of the school, evaluation of the on-site soils and subslab radon levels (to determine the potential for elevated levels of indoor radon), specific radon-resistant new-construction features installed in the school, and to the extent possible, the effectiveness of these new-construction features in reducing radon levels in the school are discussed in the paper. The effectiveness of HVAC overpressurization in reducing indoor radon levels will be evaluated following its installation in May 1988 and published in a subsequent paper.

In addition, radon data collected from two other Fairfax County Schools will be briefly presented. One school in nearing completion, and the other is approximately 20 years old. The latter has had elevated radon levels successfully mitigated with a subslab ventilation system.

BACKGROUND

The school is located on a 5.5 hectare site, and the first floor of the building in contact with the ground covers approximately 5200 m^2. Test borings of soil on the building site indicated reddish-brown, gray, and yellow sandy silt, silty sand, and lean to fat clay, some with weathered rock fragments. These soils represent residual material that was derived primarily from the chemical weathering of the parent bedrock and range from the ground surface to depths of 0.75 to 4.5 m. The predominant underlying parent bedrock in the area is interbedded grayish sandstone and reddish-brown siltstone, exhibiting relatively high and low permeabilities, respectively. It is expected that, due to its higher permeability, the sandstone material will probably exhibit a higher radon availability. The natural soils on the site were considered suitable for construction and backfill. Up to approximately 1.5 m of cut was necessary to reach floor grade in cut areas and about 1.5 m of fill needed to reach floor grade in the fill areas. Cut and fill were balanced so that no dirt was brought in or removed from the site.

The slabs are 100 mm thick, reinforced with welded wire fabric,

and poured in areas of less than 85 m^2 with tongue and groove joints between pours. Both above- and below-grade walls are constructed of concrete blocks.

Construction on the school began during the summer of 1987, and slabs were poured in the fall. The roofing was completed in February 1988, and installation of the HVAC system is expected in May 1988. All work on the school is scheduled to be completed by September 1, 1988.

EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION OF SITE RADON POTENTIAL

To help anticipate the school's potential for an indoor radon problem, two sets of soil gas radon measurements were made on the site by the U. S. Geological Survey (USGS). One set of measurements was collected prior to site grading, and the other followed completion of cut/fill distributions on the site. For each soil gas measurement, a 35 mm diameter hole was bored to a depth of approximately 0.5 to 1.0 m, a test probe inserted, soil gas sucked from the ground under carefully controlled conditions, the alpha radioactivity of the soil gas measured and converted to radon gas concentration, gas permeability in the ground at the sampling point determined, diffusion coefficient estimated, mean migration distance computed, and radon availability calculated.

The soil gas radon measurements collected within the building perimeter prior to grading of the site ranged from 200 to 4300 pCi/l. As construction progressed and cut/fill distributions on the site were completed, radon levels in the soil gas within the building perimeter ranged from 100 to 3650 pCi/l, with half of

the test holes measuring over 1000 pCi/l. Figure 1 displays the test locations and associated soil gas radon levels for the soil gas samples collected after grading of the site. These soil gas radon concentrations are indicative of a potential radon problem should the soil gas enter the school.

In an effort to correlate radon levels on the site throughout construction, grab samples of radon concentration have been taken underneath the slab and will continue to be collected throughout construction of the school. To date, three sets of subslab radon measurements have been made. The measurements are collected by drilling a 6.35 mm hole through the 100 mm slab, removing the dust with a vacuum cleaner, then inserting a tube, and pumping the gas sample to a continuous radon monitor. When time permits collecting subsequent subslab radon measurements in the same area, an effort is made to use previous test holes for retesting.

Most of the subslab radon measurements collected thus far were considerably lower than the soil gas measurements taken prior to pouring of the slabs; subslab radon levels were often an order of magnitude lower, ranging from less than 5 to almost 500 pCi/l. The results of these subslab radon measurements, collected in September 1987, December 1987, and March 1988, are displayed in Figures 2, 3, and 4, respectively. The data collected thus far exhibit no consistent trends between radon concentrations in the soil gas (Figure 1) and subslab radon levels (Figures 2, 3, and 4). There are also variations in the three sets of subslab radon measurements collected over the 6 month period. For example,

some subslab measurements in the northeast section of the building in September 1987 increased in December 1987 while others remained fairly constant. The most recent set of data in this area, collected in mid-March 1988, showed a consistent decrease in radon levels, with the exception of a hallway area that showed an increase from previous soil gas measurements.

It was anticipated that subslab radon levels would increase to a point as radon-containing soil gas accumulated under the slab. However, the data do not consistently support this theory. The results thus far indicate the possible dilution of subslab soil gas, probably resulting from a combination of the radon-resistant new-construction features incorporated into the building as discussed below and the construction activity in the building. Another possible explanation, for the lower than expected subslab radon concentrations, is the depth of the foundation. Since the soil gas samples were collected at depths of approximately 1 m, it is possible that the radon availability is not as great closer to the surface. (A qualitative assessment of radon levels in the surrounding neighborhood indicates higher radon levels in houses with poured concrete wall basements with open sumps than in split-level houses. It is not known if this is a consequence of specific construction features, or rather the depth of the foundation.) Mapping of subslab radon concentrations will be continued in order to observe any changes and to highlight areas of potential concern in the school. When the school is completed, indoor radon concentrations will be carefully monitored and correlated with the subslab measurements.

RADON-RESISTANT CONSTRUCTION FEATURES

As mentioned above, construction of the school is being carefully monitored and, where feasible, radon-resistant new-construction features are being incorporated in the building to reduce the potential for elevated levels of radon in the school. These features include the placing of at least 100 mm of clean, coarse aggregate under the slab (#57 stone), the installation of a removable plastic strip (20 by 25 mm) at the expansion joint to allow for effective sealing of the floor/wall joint with flowable polyurethane caulking, the sealing or plugging of utility penetrations where possible, and the painting of interior block walls. (Laboratory testing is currently in progress to determine the effectiveness of the paint in reducing airflow through block walls.) Should elevated levels of radon be detected in the school following completion of the building, the void space in the aggregate under the slab will allow efficient and cost-effective mitigation via subslab ventilation.

In addition to the above new-construction techniques incorporated into the school, the HVAC system has been designed to operate continuously in an overpressurization mode. Successful pressure control in the school building will be significant in reducing or eliminating negative pressure-driven entry of radon-containing soil gas.

OTHER SCHOOLS

Construction on another school in Fairfax County began in the

summer of 1987, 1 month after the school discussed above. Both schools will be completed in the summer of 1988. A few external soil gas and subslab soil gas radon measurements recently collected indicate a potential radon problem in the school. As a follow-up, subslab radon mapping was performed in mid-March 1988, and subslab radon concentrations ranged from less than 100 to over 600 pCi/l. Ten of the 14 measurements collected were over 200 pCi/l, indicating higher subslab levels than those found at the school discussed above. Since the HVAC air-circulation fans will run continuously, it is believed that overpressurization of the school will be an effective means of reducing indoor radon concentrations. Upon completion, radon levels in the school will be monitored to confirm the effectiveness of HVAC overpressurization.

In December 1987, indoor radon concentrations exceeding 10 pCi/l were discovered in several classrooms in a 20 year old school also located in Fairfax County. The building has an exhaust-only ventilation system consisting of continuously operating powered roof vents that draw air from a plenum above the ceilings; there is no other mechanical system to provide makeup air, only infiltration.

Measurements of subslab radon levels in the classrooms with elevated indoor radon levels ranged from 250 pCi/l (along the outside walls) to approximately 2000 pCi/l (near the center of the slab area). These radon levels and their distribution are typical of those found in residential housing where higher levels of radon are often found near the center of the slab (where

dilution is usually minimized), and lower levels are found around the perimeter. Pressure measurements taken when the ventilation system was operating and doors and windows were closed, indicated approximately 15 Pascals (Pa) of negative pressure in the classrooms relative to the outdoors. As a result, radon-containing soil gas was being pulled into the school.

Based on the subslab radon measurements, pressure gradients, and the ventilation system, it was concluded that a subslab depressurization system would be most effective in reducing radon levels in the school. Following installation of the system and extensive sealing, indoor radon levels were reduced to less than 1 pCi/l.

CONCLUSIONS

Unless indicated otherwise, the conclusions below apply to the newly constructed school discussed in detail in this paper.

1. For the school studied, soil gas radon measurements collected prior to pouring of the slabs do not consistently correlate with subslab radon measurements.

2. In general, subslab radon levels were lower than anticipated when compared to deeper soil gas measurements. This could result from dilution of the soil gas underneath the slab since construction was not yet complete during the subslab measurements and airflow in the subslab aggregate was probably enhanced. It is also possible that, since the soil gas samples were collected at a lower depth than the slab,

the resulting radon availability is not as great.

3. Subslab radon measurements had a tendency to vary in the three data sets collected in a 6 month period.

4. The overpressurization of HVAC systems will play a significant role in limiting pressure-driven entry of radon containing soil gas. Comparison of indoor radon levels between the two newly constructed schools should yield information on the relative effectiveness of HVAC overpressurization alone versus HVAC overpressurization combined with the installation of radon resistant new-construction features.

5. In the existing school with elevated indoor radon levels, it was apparent that significant building depressurization was occurring and that significant amounts of subslab soil gas were being drawn into the building.

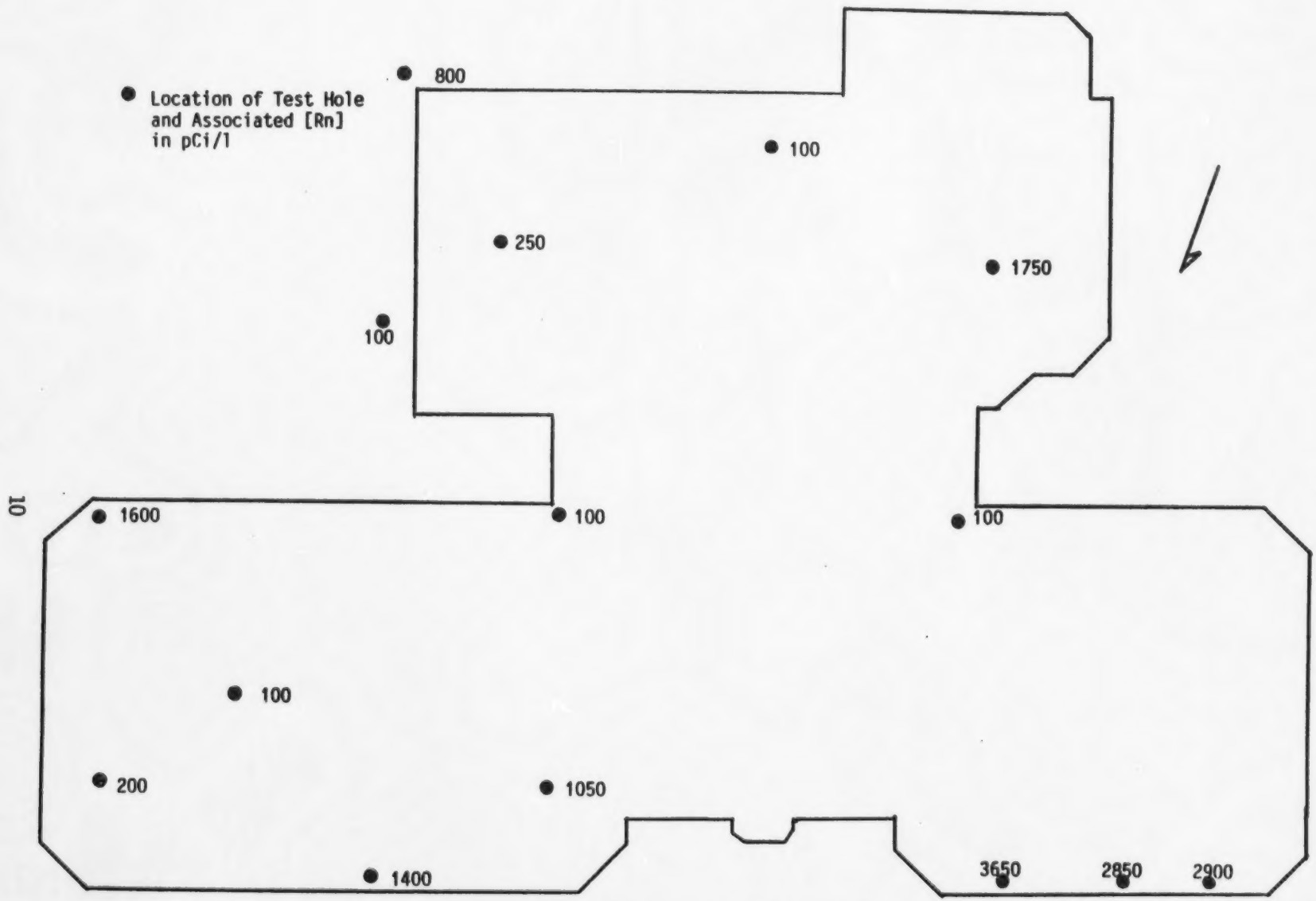

Figure 1. Radon soil gas measurements prior to pouring of slabs (July 1987).

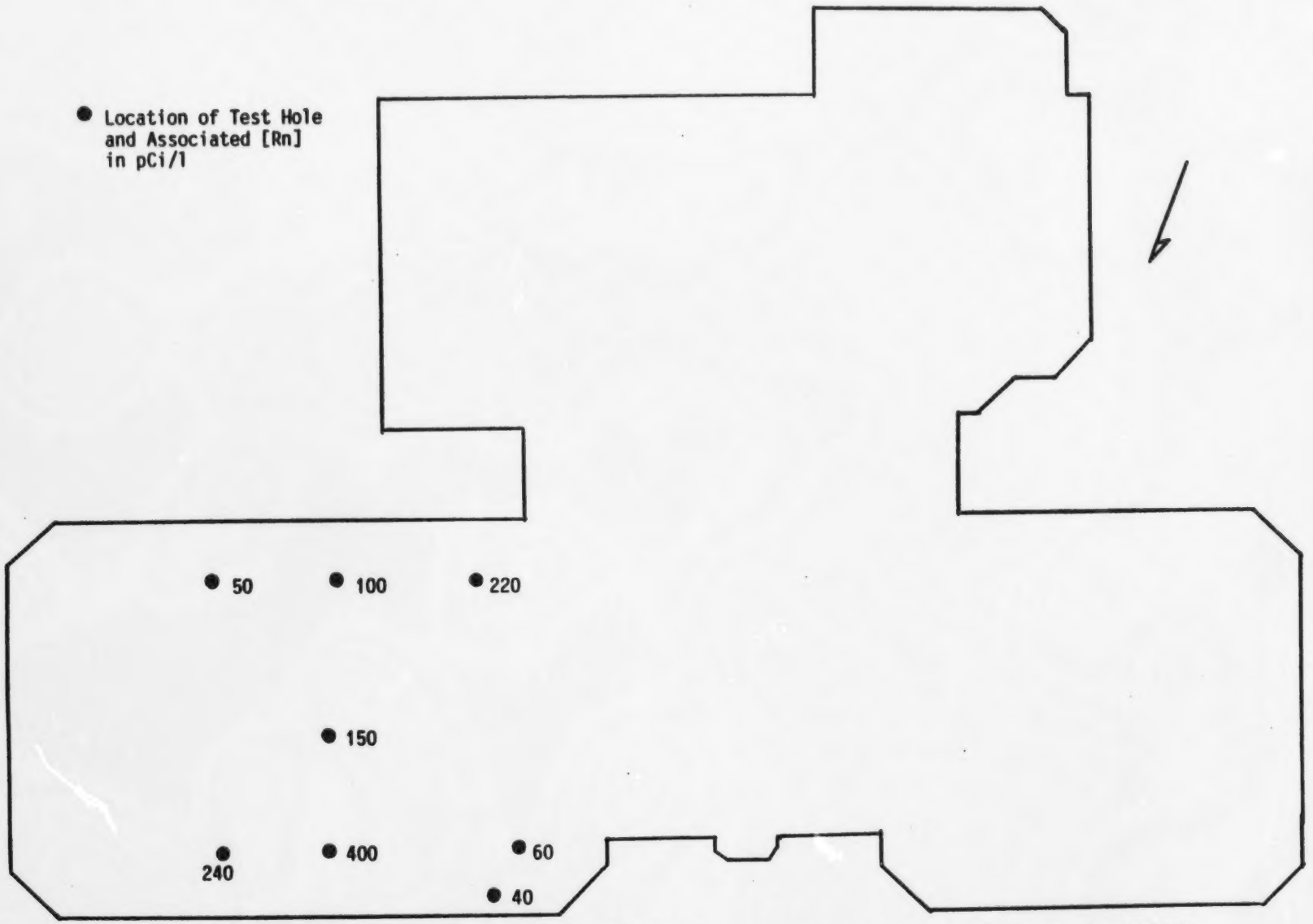

Figure 2. Subslab radon measurements--slabs in place approximately 3 weeks (September 1987).

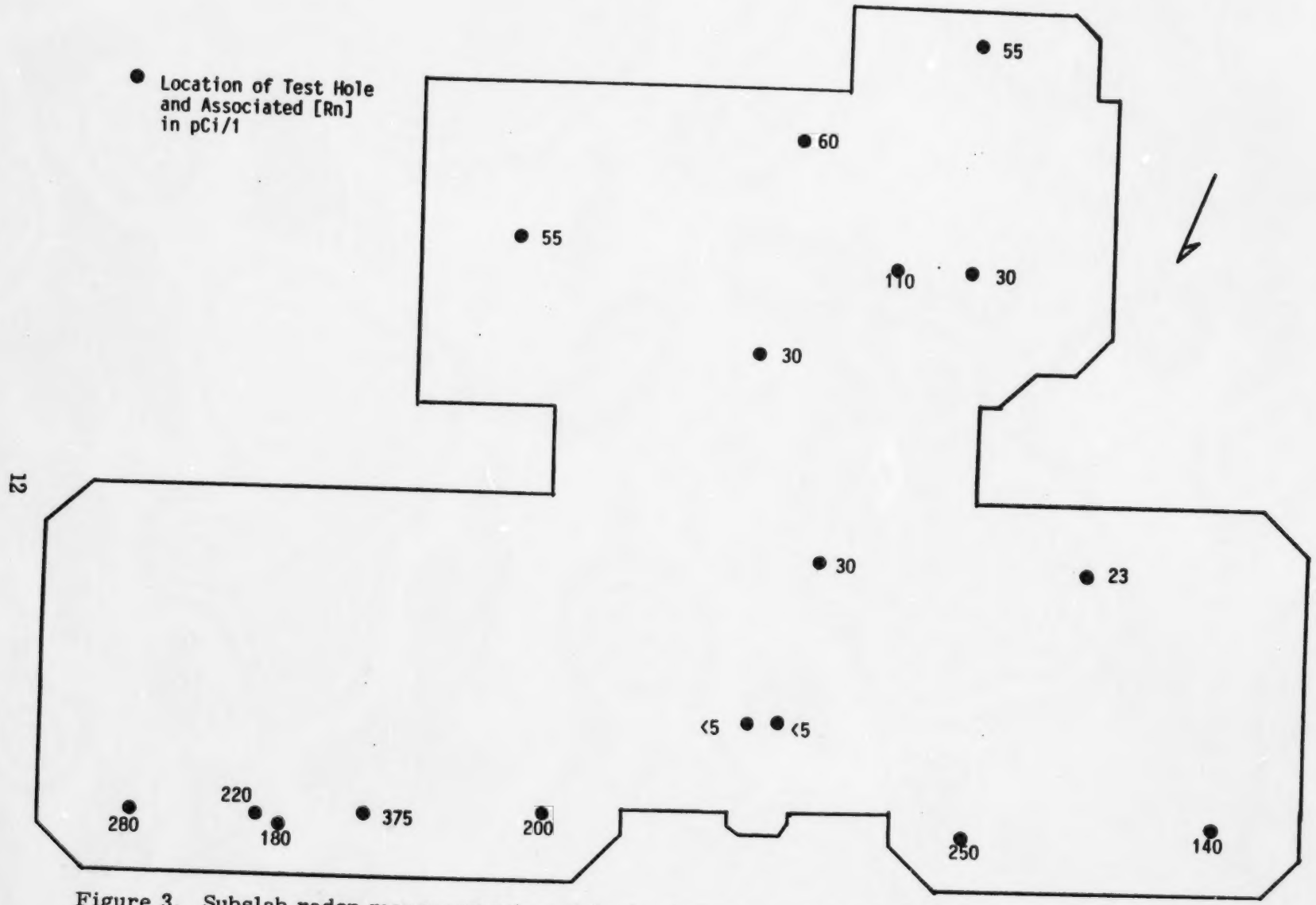

Figure 3. Subslab radon measurements--slabs in place approximately 4 months; most walls and some roofing complete (December 1987).

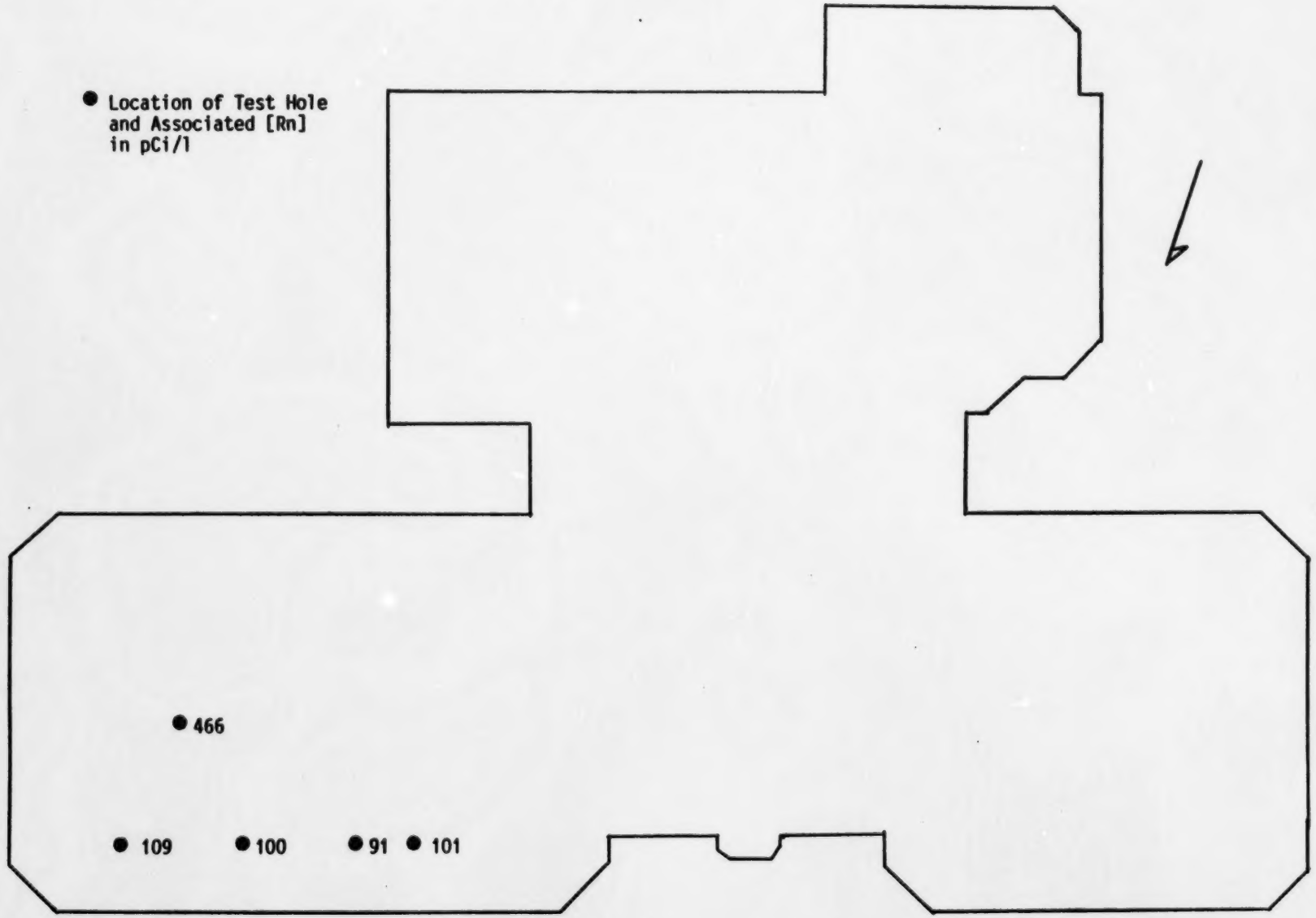

Figure 4. Subslab radon measurements--slabs in place approximately 7 months; most construction complete (March 1988).